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A Concerted Effort

The need for a combined Ethnic approach in the 2020 election

Many expected the 2016 election which saw Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy gain power to be a major step forward, not only towards democracy but also ethnic equality.

Such hopes now seem somewhat misguided in retrospect, with many ethnic political parties feeling abandoned by the NLD and especially Aung San Suu Kyi, therefore the 2020 election will allow ethnic representatives to redress the balance at the ballot box.

The NLD had been able to win the majority of seats in ethnic states based largely on the iconography of its leader and the perception that she would rule justly. While the ethnic political parties had been able to secure seats in Rakhine and Shan states, their power was largely curtailed by the NLD appointing non-ethnic State Ministers, or those with NLD loyalties. The winning ethnic political party representatives were forced to accept NLD appointments and the NLD largely ignored ethnic political parties in the governing process.

During by-elections in 2018, the NLD retained its overall parliamentary majority but lost several seats previously held in minority-dominant areas.

According to NLD spokesman Myo Nyunt,

We lost five out of six seats in ethnic areas. Ethnic people are not satisfied with our performance on the peace process . . . This result is a lesson for us. We will come up with a strategy for each constituency for the coming election.¹

While the NLD appears to be insistent on tying its electoral future, and its ability to retain ethnic votes, to the peace process, it is unlikely to see progress made on the issue before the election date. The NLD turning its back on ethnic political parties (EPPs) has not gone down well with ethnic leaders and as the election draws nearer, they need to rally their constituents around ethnic aspirations.

Also, what needs to be taken into account, is the fact that it is not necessarily in the military's best interests to have the NLD in power for another four years as the NLD continues to try to chip away at the military-drafted constitution. Already, pro-military demonstrations have taken place in Yangon seeking to prevent constitutional amendments that would weaken the military's 25% grip on power in the legislature.² It would, therefore, be better for the military, and the Union Solidarity Development Party (USDP) the most likely challenger to the NLD, to delay the peace process until after November regardless of current constraints due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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While some ethnic political parties have seemingly learnt from the mistakes in the last election and have organised along state lines, joining together to create united fronts, large scale communication strategies need to be implemented putting forward the benefits of ensuring a much larger voice for ethnic representation in the governance of the country.

Currently, ethnic parties are members of two alliances the United Nationalities Alliance (UNA) and the Nationalities Brotherhood Federation (NBF)³ but additionally:

- the Kachin State People's Party (KSPP) has been formed by three Kachin parties,⁴
- the Kayah State Democratic Party has been formed by two Kayah parties,⁵
- the Karen National Democratic Party has been formed by four Karen parties,⁶
- the Chin National League for Democracy has been formed by three Chin parties,⁷ and
- the Mon Unity Party has been formed by two Mon parties.⁸

It is believed that a number of these parties, after being largely ignored by the NLD, may seek to align themselves with the USDP.⁹ That said, however, Suu Kyi has made several attempts this year to reach out to ethnic populations she visited nearly a dozen provincial cities from January to mid-March, more than 70% of them with dominant minority populations.¹⁰

Despite this, political parties, when not fighting among themselves, do not trust Suu Kyi. It has been suggested that the Peace Process had been downplayed by the NLD from the beginning in deference towards attempts using the parliamentary process to change the 2008 constitution.¹¹

It is important to note that the military has said that if the peace process agrees on constitutional amendments, they will go along with it since they are already in the peace process. However, they do not want the constitution to be amended by a majority vote in parliament without the military's participation or agreement. The NLD has ignored this and keeps going for amendments in parliament – even though they know this will never happen. It has been suggested that this tactic is being followed so the NLD can show the electorate that they tried but are blocked by the bad guys - the military. This shows they are not interested in changing the constitution - just winning elections again.¹²

EPPs submitted many amendments. The way the NLD selected which to prioritize was by majority vote. So no ethnic amendments passed the test. All the amendments the NLD tried to pass were NLD amendments. None of the NLD amendments was about federalism - only the military's role.

The deputy chair of the KSPP said in November 2019 he would prefer if ethnic parties could work alongside the NLD, but that isn't an option,

They don't want to form a coalition government . . . so this time we have to defeat them.¹³

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And there is little to suggest that such an attitude has changed towards the NLD since then.

Further tensions have arisen concerning how the NLD have ignored the wishes of ethnic populations. One of the clearest examples is the renaming of a bridge in Mon State to the Bogyoke Aung San bridge. In the 2017 by-elections, the NLD lost to the USDP who had opposed the naming.¹⁴

Other tensions include the erection of a statue of Aung San in Loikaw, Kayah State, again against the ethnic people's wishes. The state government did not discuss the issue, with local people, nor have a prior agreement beforehand, and it reacted with violence when a protest was organised against the statue.¹⁵

The building of the statue in Karenni is one of many that have been built throughout ethnic states in the country, and many ethnic populations have seen such statues, paid for out of state coffers, as an affront to their history and ethnicity, as such further reducing the support for the NLD.

Ignoring the ethnic peoples' concerns is likely to reduce support for the NLD and further increase backing for ethnic political parties. But as of yet, ethnic political parties seem to have done little to prepare for the election and educate the ethnic base in their favour.

As one expert involved in the peace process notes,

Seeing that the NLD support could be eroded in 2020 and that both the NLD and the USDP would need to form a coalition to be able to rule, an early strategy was to form an overarching ethnic alliance to be the kingmaker. But neither the NBF nor the UNA saw that as an option. Some saw the proposed alliance as a bid by parties that did not win in the 2015 elections to hitch their wagon to the winning parties. They countered that such an alliance should only be formed after the elections. The majority of the parties did not win in the 2015 elections and saw this as a move to shut them out.

The idea of an alliance and a coalition government assumes that ethnic parties will win big in their respective states. Although five new merged ethnic parties were formed, it is still uncertain whether they can counter either the NLD or the USDP.¹⁶

It is hoped a concerted effort can be made, now, rather than later, as the election draws near. A concentrated strategy should be considered to enable further ethnic representation in government as the forthcoming election approaches.

As the same expert notes,

Concern should not be focussed on which party will win but on how ethnic representation could be increased.

However, this may be beyond the mindset of the current ethnic political leadership.¹⁷

Notes

¹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-election/myanmar-by-election-results-a-lesson-for-suu-kyis-party-idUSKCN1N90D2>, accessed 3 February 2020

² <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-politics-protest/myanmar-nationalists-hold-pro-military-rally-amid-tensions-with-government-idUSKBN2030EI>, accessed 9 February 2020

³ See EBO paper 5/19, 'Finding Common Ground'

⁴ The Kachin Democratic Party, the Kachin State Democracy Party and the Union and Democracy Party of Kachin State.

⁵ Kayah Unity Democracy party and the All Nationals' Democracy Party.

⁶ Phalon-Sawaw Democratic Party, Ksren Democratic Party, the Karen State Democracy and Development Party and the Karen National Democratic Party.

⁷ Chin National Democratic Party, Chin Progressive Party, and the Chin League for Democracy.

⁸ All Mon Region Democracy Party and the Mon National Party.

⁹ Email conversation with ethnic observer 5 April 2020

¹⁰ <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Aung-San-Suu-Kyi-reaches-out-to-ethnic-minorities-in-election-year>, accessed 10 April 2020

¹¹ Email correspondence with Myanmar political observer 29 April 2020

¹² Email correspondence with Myanmar expert involved in the peace process, 29 April 2020

¹³ <https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/we-merged-and-we-won-ethnic-parties-set-aside-differences-to-claw-back-seats-from-nld> accessed 10 April 2020

¹⁴ <https://coconuts.co/yangon/news/controversial-bogyoke-aung-san-bridge-opens-in-mon-state/>, accessed 6 April 2020

¹⁵ <https://www.tni.org/en/article/the-promise-and-the-statue>, accessed 6 April 2020

¹⁶ Email correspondence with Myanmar expert involved in the peace process, 29 April 2020

¹⁷ Ibid.